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The Marxist analysis of Manjula Padmanabhan's "*Lights Out*"

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Abstract

The societal rules have been largely shaped by the male-dominated legislators and forces where there is a limited right to exist for a woman. The woman though married or unmarried or a prostitute the way the society looks at her is not changing though we are globalized. Indian women, in some ways, have also made some strides. Millions of women have joined the workforce. Leaders like the Prathibha Singh Patel, Sushma Swaraj, Anandiben are role models who show that women can rise to great heights. But one of the greatest tragedies in our country is that women are on their own when it comes to their safety. According to many studies, it's understood that most of the rape cases of rape are never reported because of the stigma surrounding gang rape. Considering this wide scenario, this article touches on Indian women's vulnerability with a Marxist approach. I have applied the Marxist approach to analyse literary text, *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan in Indian English Theatre. In her work, the author proposes the urgent need to address women's subordinated position as they are subjected to different forms of discrimination. In this article, I have focused on difference issues such as gender discrimination, injustice, and fear of the law, police and judicial apathy. I conclude by suggesting recommendations for the improvement of women's situation in India.

Keywords: Marxism, gender role, Indian women, violence against women, Indian English theatre.

Introduction

Gita Aravamudan, an Indian author, wrote an article for *The Hindu*, Sunday Magazine, in May 2015 in which she asked why India is dragging its feet on criminalizing marital rape. Throughout her article, "*When home turns into hell*" Gita Aravamudan proposes and discusses how married women in India are often treated as sex-slave and are forced to have sex without their wish. After reading this article, I found her argument to be similar to what has been discussed in the play *Lights Out* written by Manjula Padmnabhan (1986). The play is similar to Aravamudan's argument of women's treatment as a sexual object though the focus of Padmanabhan's storyline remains on women in general and not specifically of married women. *Lights Out* by Manjula Padmanabhan asks for attention to the plight of women in this world in general, and in India in particular. She highlights that women become victims of manoeuvres of males which is an attempt by men to slight and subvert the women.

Human beings are the sum totals of the experiences they have in their life because their sensibilities are developed and shaped by what the individuals come across, observe, feel and think about the things happening around their lives. It is natural for an artist to express his/her perception of life in its varied colours through his/her art. Similarly, Padmanabhan work is also influenced by urban Indian socio-cultural patriarchal settings which she has attempted to portray through play. As life becomes meaningful only in its societal form, what its members do in their life will invite responses and reactions from their surroundings. Theatre is one of the most powerful yet very subtle forms to express, to communicate the incommunicable with the audience; it is closest to the human being because no other form brings the individual so close to his interior self, asking questions about his existence vis-à-vis his milieu.

The play, written in 1986, with a clear stamp of gender-division as focused in *The Hindu* by Geetha Aravamudam (2015), has given a chance to discuss the books written by women writers on women. Interestingly it also shows that even after three decades how Indian women tend to face similar forms of gender and socio-cultural discrimination and violence. Some of these forms of violence are rape, domestic violence, honour killings, trafficking, forced marriages, stalking and sexual harassment. Recent reports by National Crime Report Bureau (NCRB) states that Maharashtra¹, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh in India are top states in which sexual crime against women is high (NCRB, 2015).

A woman is often at a socio-cultural level merely considered as weakling, body and instrumental, who cannot protect herself from any kind of physical attacks by a male without minding the relation. Manjula believes that the growing indifferent attitude of the people is the major cause of the increasing rate of crimes in the society. *Lights Out* clearly depicts one of the intersectional dimensions to domestic violence, rape, and sexual assault. The play also gives a scope to incorporate honour-based crime and trafficking as transcultural phenomena and oppression as is defined by Marxism (Lindsey, 1981).

The concept of Marxism and its debate

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was primarily a theorist and historian. After examining social organization in a scientific way; political science, he perceived human history to have consisted

¹The play is based on Mumbai, capital of Maharashtra.

of a series of struggles. That is in between classes--between the oppressed and the oppressing. Psychoanalyst Freud (Abrams, 1999) saw "sexual energy" to be the motivating factor behind the human endeavour. Nabokov seemed to feel artistic impulse was the real factor, Marx thought that 'historical materialism' was the ultimate driving force, a notion involving the distribution of resources, gain, production, and such matters (Abrams, 1999).

Marxist literary criticism is a loose term describing literary criticism based on socialist and dialectic theories. It views literary works as reflections of the social institutions from which they originate. According to Marxists, even literature itself is a social institution and has a specific ideological function, based on the background and ideology of the author. The English literary critic and cultural theorist, Terry Eagleton (1976) defines Marxist criticism this way:

Marxist criticism is not merely a 'sociology of literature', concerned with how novels get published and whether they mention the working class. Its aim is to explain the literary work more fully; and this means a sensitive attention to its forms, styles and meanings. But it also means grasping those forms, styles and meanings as the product of a particular history. (p.3).

It argues that literature reflects social conditions and that it is one itself, with a particular ideological function. Literature participates in the series of struggles between oppressed and the oppressing classes which make up human history. Through it, we also can examine how some works attempt to shore up an oppressive social order or how they idealize social conflict out of existence, how others offer an alternative collective life or propose a utopian vision as a solution.

The issue of the literary textbook and history concerned finds important to many debates within Marxism. Marx (1845) himself expresses critical concerns with the historicist tendency. He argues that people are products of their circumstances and social upbringing. Therefore, changed people are products of changed circumstances and changed upbringing, forgets that it is people who change circumstances and that the educator must himself be educated. Hence this doctrine is bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society.

In this play *Lights Out*, the playwright clearly portrays the response of 'surrounded' people against a gang rape of a woman. The readers hear the screams and know about it only through the dialogues of remaining characters. On whom? Who involved? How many? All these questions are left to the readers' perception. It is mentioned that gang rape happened in an apartment at night time. That gang rape victim may be a lower caste woman, an employee, a sex

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worker, or anyone, but a woman, a weakling and meant for bodily pleasure for the male. This literary text is certainly reflecting on the situation of women now and then in the 1980s.

Marxism and women

The patriarchal families and domination of men over women in married life all made the women fight for the social equality. As Lindsey (2007) mentioned, “*No one walks down the aisle in a white dress thinking they are doing this for the benefit of capital or to reproduce the next generation of workers*”.

The focus of Marx is struggle and inequality which is a common theme in domestic violence. Marx discusses how the proletarian and bourgeois are dependent on each other which are also similar in relationships with domestic violence. The proletarian is without property (Marx & Engels, 1848).

The family is the place women and men expect to be loved and cherished, perhaps to bring up children, whether their own or those of their partner. However, the stresses and strains of daily life can make that a nearly impossible task. The family creates expectations about hierarchy and gender roles for all men and women and children, which can be unbearable for individual family members. Heather Brown (2012) argues, “men and women always exist and interact within concrete circumstances mediated by definite social relations” (p.28). Often relationships creak under the strains they are expected to bear; sometimes the family is an unbearable place to be, and at times it explodes.

Mitra (2000) and Ahmed Ghosh (2004) suggest that women in India live in a male-dominated society subjugated by heteronormative (following established gender roles), and patriarchal ideals. The rigid mindsets with caste, creed, community, family structures contributed to the rapid increase in the domestic violence in society. Recent crimes by their family members on women and girl children show the reluctant behaviour of society and the role of the males in the family towards women.

A girl who was abused by her father reports that her father used to give her alcohol every day before sexually abusing her. She has also named 4-5 friends of her father who also abused her in an inquiry by Dr. Ajeesh Ramachandran, Psychiatrist of the Government District Hospital, Aluva, who treated the child (*India Today*, 2012). This was reported by the victim out of severe

sufferance, so came into limelight and possible actions were taken. There are so many cases which go unreported due to many socio-psychological reasons and socio-cultural taboo.

Shreya Jani, (2016) who runs a peace education NGO in New Delhi, says to a news channel that "Sexual harassment and child abuse is definitely a cause for concern in India.... It's heartening to see that now more women are reporting these crimes and speaking up. As Indian women, we are a paradox of strength and silence. I am glad the silence is being broken by many now."

The facts about sexual violence within and outside of the house make this all too clear. In India, a woman is raped every 29 minutes. Incidents of reported rape increased 3% from 2011 to 2012. Incidents of reported incest rape increased 46.8% from 268 cases in 2011 to 392 cases in 2012 (NCRB, 2015). Gang rape and issue of violence against women, in general, have been common to Indian society. According to NCRB data 927 incidents of children's rapes were reported in 2015, making Delhi most unsafe city for children. Child rights activists and police agree that the actual number could be much bigger (NCRB, 2015).

The almost constant stream of revelations about sexual harassment and worse in the public domain are a reminder, if one was needed, that women are not necessarily safe at work place. Amongst all the twenty-two countries covered by the IPSOS– Reuters survey (2009), India recorded the highest incidence of sexual harassment. Similarly Center for Transforming India survey (2010) revealed that nearly 88 percent of women witnessed some form of workplace sexual harassment during the course of their work. Recently media widely reported about a lab assistant who set herself ablaze outside the Delhi Secretariat and succumbed to injuries. She was protesting against sexual harassment she faced from the college principal and termination from the job. She repeatedly filed complaints with several authorities including the University but in vain. Such incidents highlight break down of grievance redress mechanisms within the organizations and throw light on the predicament of women facing sexual harassment at workplace in India (Pradhan-Malla, 2005).

It is important to remember that feminists and socialists combined in the 1970s to campaign successfully in defence of abortion rights. Today there is no reason why a similar campaign in unions and workplaces could not be equally successful in establishing that sexual harassment of any kind is unacceptable. The acceptance of sexist language in society should be challenged.

Trotsky (1923) suggests that “*To alter the position of woman at the root is possible only if all the conditions of social, family, and domestic existence are altered*”.

Far from empowering women, it reflects the view that women are subordinate to men and reducible to their sexuality. Many women are forced to deal with harassment and unwanted attention because they are women. Inequalities in the position of men and women exist in nearly all societies and sexual harassment at work is a clear manifestation of unequal power relations. Women are vulnerable to the harassment because they lack similar power, lack self-confidence and are socialized that they are to suffer in silence. Sexual harassment is also used as a device to discourage women who may be seen to be competing for power. Discussions of sexual harassment in the international feminist and legal scholarship have been focusing overwhelmingly on the workplace; however adequate attention is yet to be given to harassment issues in universities and public places.

A brief introduction of Manjula Padmanabhan

Manjula Padmanabhan, a playwright, a cartoonist, a novelist and an artist who lives in New Delhi, India, won Alexander S. Onassis Award for Theatre for her play *Harvest*. She has penned about half –a dozen plays. Manjula is the daughter of a diplomat and she spent her childhood in Sweden, Pakistan, and Thailand. She has authored a collection of short stories, called *Kleptomania*. Her most recent book, published in 2008, is *Escape*. Apart from writing newspaper columns, she created comic strips. She created Suki, an Indian comic character, which was serialized as a strip in the *Sunday Observer*. Before 1997 (the year her play *Harvest* was staged) she was better known as a cartoonist and had a daily cartoon strip in *The Pioneer* newspaper.

Some of her plays have been made into T V Serials and films. The present drama, *Lights Out* is Manjula’s first play and was written and performed in 1986². It was published in a collection called *Body Blows – Women, Violence and Survival- Three Plays* in 2002. The present play *Lights Out* discussed in this paper is based on a real situation of women’s rape that happened at

²In an interview, Padmanabhan says: The first one (play) *Lights Out*, started out as a piece of journalism. A friend told me about a particularly horrific incident, when she and a party of people became witnesses to a gang rape taking place in the neighbouring compound. The hostess of the party claimed that this was a regular occurrence and that residents of that area had had to adjust their daily schedules around these gruesome open-air ‘performances’. It was such a shocking story that I felt it surely merited a newspaper report.

Santa Cruz in Bombay (now known as Mumbai), Maharashtra, and India in 1982. In the early 1980s, estimates of rape against women were derived from two primary sources, the nationwide crime victimization survey (the National Crime Survey [NCS]) and the “official” statistics from the Uniform Crime Report (UCR) (Kanin, 1957; Kanin & Parcell, 1977; Kirkpatrick & Kanin, 1957; Russell, 1982). Scholars claimed, however, that these data sources substantially underestimated the true incidence of rape. UCR, for example, relied on reported crimes, but many rapes are not reported to the police. This play clearly depicts about how a gang rape was not stopped, reported or complained by anyone present there and moreover it highlights the fears of people who witness the accused.

Analysis of the play

The reluctance to get involved, the reluctance to get out and do something, to take a stand is all authentically portrayed in this play. Leela (wife) and Bhasker (husband), an upper middle class married couple, have often been hearing to strange sounds of sexual harassment of a woman from their neighbouring building. Leela is terrified and traumatised because of these sounds. These sounds make Leela hysterical; she is able to hear the voice of the victim and feel her cries in her subconscious mind. Leela implores to Bhasker to take action against the perpetrators, but all her pleas fall on the deaf ears. Bhasker is least disturbed by all these actions and sounds.

The Scene One starts with Bhasker, who lives in an apartment with the family opposite of it, a newly constructed building which is ready to occupy, but no living atmosphere except nightly scary sounds. His wife, Leela, who is scared of the sounds complains him and requests to find out the possible solution. Bhasker suggests the possible ways to come out of the issue; he suggests practicing meditation and also educates Leela to learn to ignore. He always thinks of pros and cons without calling the police. Here how the common man is confused and afraid of the Police system and enquiry is shown. Of course, they are neither in a position to tackle the situation nor to get involved in it. Even they struggle in between not to disclose to any friends or relatives.

Leela: When you were away on tour, I couldn't sleep at night! And with all the windows shut, with all the curtains drawn, with cotton in my ears-the sound still came though! Even in the children's room, on the other side of the house, I could hear it!³(p.112).

Meanwhile, one of Leela's female friends Naina and her husband Surinder arrive at their home unexpectedly. They too get involved in the discussion and begin to interpret things on the basis of the available proofs. All this shows the male attitude towards the suffering of women. Naina is told by Leela, that the strange sounds that she hears are the sounds of locale slum religious ceremony. But Naina grows inquisitive and looks out of the window to know what kind of religious ceremony is taking place exactly and finds to her horror four men assaulting a woman sexually. She is shaken to see three men holding a woman as the fourth attacks her brutally through which the audience/reader also witness the assault.

All male and female characters in the play, just talks of the nightly gang rape that takes place but no one is willing to do anything. They know clearly that some injustice is going on a woman or someone is forcing for sex. The Scene opens in an apartment in Bombay, India. For over half century now, there is no specific law for women. The play clearly examines the society around us as is said by Marx about the 'oppressed' and 'the oppressing' and also the dominating male class who own the woman either or the other way.

The woman in the play, Leela and Naina, are the ones moved by the rape and "nag" the men to take action. The men in the play, especially Bhasker and one of his male friends Mohan, don't mind watching the rape and look for excuses not to do anything. Mohan reveals his desire to see the crime out of curiosity and seek pleasure out of it which is another way of taking advantage of the adverse situation of others. Some of the arguments not to go to the police were: ugly sounds can't hurt; the police will not come even if they are informed; the unnecessary interference if it is a domestic fight; maybe it's something religious and therefore one should not interfere; if the victim is a whore she requires no protection; why should we interfere when we ourselves haven't been harmed; the 'rapist' are human beings and so we must understand that they have problems

³Chandra, Lakshmi. Ed., *Lights On! Indian Plays in English, Lights Out*, Manjula Padmanabhan, CIEFL, Hyd. ISBN:81-85855-00-5. All the text book references are from this book.

too; and then the endless discussion on what to do. By which time the rape is over and the rapists have all gone away. The way the play ends sends shivers down the spine.

Through the casual attitude of Bhasker and other male characters in the play Padmanabhan tries to project the mind set of male, usually men try to control women, men are the one to decide what a woman should think, what a woman should do, and what a woman should sense. The chief intention of the unconcerned outlook by Bhasker, his two friends Mohan and Surinder is to build internal dread in the minds of Leela, her friend Naina and Leela's domestic help Frieda. By doing so, they can uphold and sustain the ever-reigning patriarchal power inside as well as outside the home. The display of male dominance and women subversion is evidently seen in *'Lights Out'*.

As L. Amrithashwori Devi (2011) truly comments, — “The subjugation, the torture or the way our women suffer may be different but the age old system of dominance over women by men will never end and they are and will always be victim in our male chauvinistic society”(p.88)

Here it is clearly depicted the way the society thinks and behaves with ‘others’. ‘Other’ is every difference from the superior one male to the female. As Marxism says there shouldn't be any classless society, but still it is in dreams and so the equality in between male and female.

Because the middle-class attitude to prostitutes or to the poor, where it's all right “as long as it's the poor attacking the poor”, or it is some local religious ceremony put on by “the local slum dweller”, or about what “illiterate people believe” when a demon possesses a woman.

In the Second scene, its dinner time, when Mohan, a guest comes to their house, though they discuss a lot on the issue. Though he is of the opinion that it is unnatural not to involve if suppose someone meets an accident before us.

Mohan:It's unnatural not to look. It's unnatural not to get involved. (p.120)

Manjula tried to peep into the human mindset, where very commonly in Indian society, especially middle class people, who always put themselves in borders, never involve in such issues. When some unexpected incidents come to us then we remember about the humanity, values, societal changes, inequalities and so on.

When we go on reading the play, we certainly get involved and expect the characters should stop discussing and go for action, which ends very disappointingly, and proves that it's the society where we are living and expecting for identity. Though we live unpleasantly, there are so many people around us, whose lives we should not ignore.

In the last scene, the characters are eating dinner, they think of so many plans to end up the brutal scene going in the neighbouring apartment, but they don't do anything. Finally, they think of taking snaps and to make money by selling the authentic rape scene snaps to the news channels and the media. Here one can observe how thoughts change from one to another in the little span of time. In India, such incidents are repeatedly occurring till now, though the play is focusing on the crimes happened in 1986. A woman was gang-raped in Uttar Pradesh, and said the incident had been recorded on a mobile phone by the rapists (Reuters Africa, 2016). Increasingly, perpetrators are recording their crimes on mobile phones to use as a blackmailing tool and to dissuade victims from going to the police. The *Independent* (2016) reported that graphic mobile phone clips of gang rapes are being sold in shops in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh, as a spate of rapes in one of the country's most violent states has sparked anger and calls for the chief minister to step down. The clips, which last 30 seconds to five minutes, are being sold in the "hundreds, perhaps thousands, every day. They cost 50-150 rupees (\$0.75-\$2) each.

In the play Bhasker's friend Mohan like people certainly involve in such issues and they take pleasure to watch women appearing before them as a site of gratifying desire as well as transforms into a kind of cultural courtesan.

Another approach of this play is realism, which is a movement in literature and is based on "objective reality", and focused on showing every day, quotidian activities and life. That is primarily among the middle or lower class society, without romantic idealization or dramatization. It may be regarded as the general attempt to depict subjects as they are considered to exist in third person objective reality, without embellishment or interpretation and "in accordance with secular, empirical rules." As such, the approach inherently implies a belief that such reality is ontologically independent of man's conceptual schemes, linguistic practices, and beliefs, and thus can be known (or knowable) to the artist, who can, in turn, represent this 'reality'

faithfully. Because a woman is always seen playing a subservient role to a man. The status of the woman and the plight of her suffering is seen between two influential beings, firstly a man, who with his age old dominant power has a control on the woman and secondly a woman who turns into an instrument of his authority.

Manjula has given such precise instructions, and her use of the language and sets is so realistic, that the only choice would be realism. Even her use of time would broadly coincide with the time it takes to enact the play. There is no moving backwards and forwards in time – there is a straight chronological progression of time in this play. Scene one opens with Bhasker coming home from the office, in Scene Two it's dinner time, in Scene Three, the characters are eating dinner, and this is where the play ends. Finally, when we read the incident was a fact, as in the play, a group of ordinary middle-class people chose to stand and watch while a woman was being brutalized in a neighbouring compound, in 1982, one can see that there is no change in the society and it is the same till now. Manjula believes that the growing indifferent attitude of the people is the major cause of the increasing rate of crimes in the society. Marxist criticism also challenges us to remember the 'centrality of class struggle' and the determining 'role of the forces' and 'relations of production to social life' and literary production.

In India, the laws for women should be strict like in developed countries. The expected change in the society is possible when there is social equality. It is the only solution which brings responsibility in society.

Conclusion

The humanity of things will mean shaping a new social system that will manage social equality among the people in the world. This will mean the need for a genuine reform of our political and economic institutions so as to make them fit for a new age. Also, it should also mean that concerted effort is channelled toward solving the political and environmental problems that will fit into the interconnected and highly complex global age. There should be more drama on social equalities and real situations which bring awareness among the people and its impact and effects on cultures and social life of nations. It is in the spirit of trying to change the fortunes of the developing countries that Padmanabhan wrote her play. This is because developing nations are the ones that are badly affected by inequality. According to Rai (2006), Manjula draws our

attention to the heart rendering screams of a woman. Women face violence in many aspects of their daily life. This violence is multi-faceted. It is not merely physical but more often mental or emotional and sexual. It is deeply complex, subtle and indirect, hard to recognize and much more difficult to overcome (p.22).

Although several case studies exist, few rigorously evaluate (Ottens & Hotelling, 2001) the effectiveness of law for women and policies by Government. There is also not much evaluation of the impact of NGOs educational programmes for women about awareness, prevention, and reporting of rape and other forms of sexual victimization, or how effectively people respond to the report of sexual assault. Together, along with social activists and women's associations, this new awareness will help to fill the knowledge gaps in these two areas and shed light on 'what works' to reduce rape and other types of sexual victimization within a women population.

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